Gaither Report Declassified After 15 Years, Cited Threat

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The Nixon administration has stripped the "top secret" wraps off a controversial 15-year-old national security report picturing a rising threat from a nuclear-armed Soviet Union, "which may become critical in 1959 or early 1960."

The Gaither Report, as it became known during the 1957 row over defense spending, proposed to President Eisenhower urgent U.S. weapons and civil defense programs with a price tag up to $44 billion over a five-year period.

"The next two years seem to us critical," concluded the blue-ribbon citizens panel headed by H. Rowan Gaither Jr. in its report dated Nov. 7, 1957.

"If we fail to act at once, the risk, in our opinion, will be unacceptable," it said.

The main points of the 40-page study soon leaked to the press at the time. But Mr. Eisenhower, while accepting some of its recommnedations and rejecting others, turned down pleas from then Vice President Nixon and others to make the report public.

Mr. Eisenhower relates in his book, "Waging the Peace, 1956-61," that he ruled out publication on grounds that confidential advice must remain confidential if the President wants to continue to get it.

Mr. Eisenhower also was fighting pressure for a big boost in federal spending. And he said he wanted to avoid panic amidst the furor following the Soviet launch of the first Sputnik satellite in October, 1957.

Release of the Gaither report is the first decision handed down by the new Inter-Agency Classification Review Committee headed by John S.D. Eisenhower, son of the former President, a spokesman said.

The committee is the final judge under the revamped classification system put into effect by Mr. Nixon last June. Under it, secret papers at least 10 years old are supposed to be made public upon request unless an official review finds to the contrary.

Even on a historic document a decade and a half old, whose contents have been generally known, the John Eisenhower committee had to overrule opposition inside today's National Security Council to yanking off the secrecy stamp.

Some officials were said to feel that publication might harm U.S. - Soviet relations and the Strategic Arms limitation Talks in particular.

Mr. Nixon was said to have taken no personal role in the declassification decision.

President Eisenhower named the panel of prominent citizens under Gaither, then chairman of the Ford Foundation board, in May, 1957, to study new technological means of defense against nuclear attack.

When Gaither fell ill, Robert C. Sprague, chairman of the Sprague Electric Co. became panel director.

The report said, "USSR intentions are expansionist, and her great efforts to build military power go beyond any concepts of Soviet defense . . .

"The evidence clearly indicates an interesting threat which may become critical in 1959 or early 1960."

Its recommendations ranged from stepping up the alert of U.S. defenses to increasing U.S. counterstrike capability and building fallout shelters for the civilian populance.